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WaLeg Day 40: Is charter school bill an innovative fix or money laundering?

By Jim Camden
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OLYMPIA – A proposal to find a new way to send state money to public charter schools approved recently by the Senate was described by some as a way to save innovative education and by others as an unconstitutional money-laundering plan.

Brenda McDonald, chief executive officer of Pride Prep in Spokane, urged the House Education Committee to approve a bill that seeks a way around a recent Supreme Court ruling that charter schools are unconstitutional.

“In Spokane, we believe in this,” McDonald told the committee. “Our budget was approved by the Spokane Public School Board. Our accountability measures were approved by the Spokane Public School Board.”

But most other charter schools in the state were not approved by their local school board, which means they lack local control by voters and can’t draw from the same tax sources as public schools, the state Supreme Court ruled last year. Under the state constitution, only “common” schools can receive money from the General Fund, the court ruled.

[Senate Bill 6194](#) attempts to solve that by declaring that charter schools are not common schools, and providing them with \$18 million from the state Lottery, which now covers some other educational programs and scholarships. The state would then replace that money with \$18 million from the general fund, so the other programs wouldn’t be shorted.

Rep. Chris Reykdal, D-Tumwater, said that sounded more like “laundering lottery money and back filling it” and could lead to another court case.

“This is not the final solution,” Rep. Larry Springer, D-Kirkland, said. “It is the first step in finding that final solution” which legislators will continue to work on over the next several weeks.

As with previous hearings on a possible fix to the charter school law approved by voters in 2012, supporters said the state needed innovative settings where students who were struggling in the public schools could get the attention they needed in smaller class sizes and a more varied curriculum. Several students underscored that point with personal stories of success after enrolling in a charter school

Opponents countered that the 1 million students in public schools also need smaller classes, too, and the Legislature is still under a \$100,000 a day fine for not coming up with a plan to meet its constitutional duty to them. Lawmakers should concentrate on that, they said.

SB 6194 passed the Senate on a 27-20 vote last month, with all Republicans voting yes and most Democrats voting no. It is scheduled for a vote, and possible amendments, in the House Education Committee next week.